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THE PARADOX OF IMMIGRATION

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In almost every popular discussion of the immigration problem—and there is scarcely a question of public interest on which the average citizen feels himself more thoroughly qualified to express an opinion—two fundamental principles are assumed. These are, first, that immigration increases the population of the United States by an amount equal to the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants; and secondly, that emigration from European countries reduces the population there, relieves congestion, and by serving as an outlet for the excess of people, improves conditions. These two propositions having been taken for granted, the argument proceeds in one direction or another according to the observation, taste, prejudices, or interests of the arguer. A moment's reflection will show to what extent the validity of the stock arguments on these topics rests upon the truth or falsity of these fundamental assumptions. And it is inevitable that it should be so, for the effect of immigration movements on density of population lies at the very heart of the whole matter.

Since this is the case, it is tremendously important for the true understanding of the immigration problem, that these two propositions be subjected to the severest scrutiny, and the result of the investigation be firmly impressed on the minds of students of the subject, and of the populace in general. At the outset, however, we must candidly face the fact that we are not likely ever to arrive at a positive proof, one way or the other. Like so many other social phenomena, changes in population are affected by so many and so complicated influences, that it is impossible to arrive at a mathematical demonstration of any one factor, which involves the elimination of all others. Immigration may affect population, but so do war, vice, hard

times, marriage customs, and a host of other things, and it is far beyond the present power of social science positively to define the relative importance of each of these forces. Nevertheless, much may be gained by studying the laws of population in relation to immigration; and by a careful consideration of tendencies, analogies, illustrations, and concrete cases, conclusions may be reached which have sufficient reasonableness to give them authority.

Let us then consider these two suppositions in turn. First, do the immigrants to the United States constitute a corresponding addition to the total population of the country? At first glance this may seem almost a self-evident proposition. That it is not, however, is evidenced by the strikingly large number of the deeper thinkers on the subject who hold the opposite view. General Francis A. Walker says, "Space would not serve for a full statistical demonstration of the proposition that immigration, during the period from 1830 to 1860 instead of constituting a net reinforcement to the population, simply resulted in a replacement of native by foreign elements; but I believe it would be practicable to prove this to the satisfaction of every fair-minded man."¹ Mr. Hall himself holds firmly to this opinion, and quotes a number of writers who are more or less positive in their statements of the causal relation between immigration and the diminishing native birth rate. Mr. F. A. Bushee says, "The multiplication of foreign peoples has seriously checked the growth of the old American stock."² Mr. Robert Hunter is a pronounced advocate of this view and says, "The immigrants are not additional inhabitants. Their coming displaces the native stock."³ An extreme, but convincing, opinion is that expressed by Mr. S. G. Fisher in the *Popular Science Monthly* for December, 1895. After a careful statistical survey of the growth of population in the United States, he states his conviction that "immigration has not materially

¹ Quoted by Prescott F. Hall, *Immigration*, 107.

² F. A. Bushee, "The Declining Birth-Rate and Its Cause," *Popular Science Monthly*, LXIII, 355.

³ Robert Hunter, "Immigration the Annihilator of Our Native Stock," *The Commons*, April, 1904.

increased, but, on the contrary, has somewhat decreased the American population. . . . All the immigrants and all their increase cannot make up for the loss of the old rate of increase of the natives." Professor John R. Commons also supports this position.

In view of this imposing weight of authoritative opinion, it is perhaps surprising that the popular mind still holds so tenaciously and universally to the belief that immigration directly increases population. The explanation probably lies in ignorance of the facts of the case and of the fundamental laws of population, and in the somewhat abstruse nature of the reasoning by which the expert conclusions are reached.

The line of argument by which, in general, all writers such as those to whom we have just referred have reached their conclusions, is as follows. The population of the United States at the time it became a nation was almost wholly of native origin. It was a homogeneous people, of one stock, one language, and one set of traditions, customs, and beliefs. For the first forty years of our national life the increase of population was phenomenal, doubling every twenty-two or twenty-three years. Malthus chose the North American colonies as an example of the extreme possibilities of increase under favorable conditions, and the rate continued for many years after they ceased to be colonies. Between 1790 and 1830 the population increased from less than 4,000,000 to nearly 13,000,000, or 227 per cent in forty years. An estimate made in 1815, based on the first three censuses, reckoned the probable population of the United States in 1900 at 100,235,985. The fact that it was, instead, only 76,303,387 in spite of the incoming of 19,115,221 aliens since 1820 shows that there must have been a tremendous falling-off in the native birth rate. Careful study reveals the fact that the birth rate first began to decline appreciably about 1830, just the period when the effects of immigration first began to be strongly felt in this country, and that it diminished progressively with the swelling volume of the immigration current. Moreover, it was in just those sections where the immigrants congregated most thickly that the fall in the native birth

rate was most pronounced, even down to such minor divisions as counties. New England, which, at the time of the Revolution, held the most homogeneous population in the country, and had the highest birth rate, has now the greatest proportion of foreigners and, as far as the natives at least are concerned, the lowest birth rate. To such an extent has this decline gone, that at the present time the native stock in large sections of New England is not even maintaining itself. Coincidences of time and place between the phenomena of immigration and those of the declining birth rate are so numerous and so striking, that, in the words of General Walker, they "constitute a statistical demonstration such as is rarely attained in regard to the operation of any social or economic force."⁴

This line of argument has been so thoroughly and convincingly expounded by a number of writers that we need not dwell upon it further here. Its one weakness is just that which we anticipated at the outset—it lacks mathematical positiveness. An opponent might readily claim that the appalling decline in the native birth rate (the existence of which no one would care to deny) was due to some one or other of a variety of different causes, or to several operating together. The sections where the birth rate is the lowest are not only those where immigration has been the heaviest. They are also to a large extent those which are characterized most distinctively by manufacturing industry, or where the population is the densest. Why not assign the falling birth rate to one of these causes?

The best answer to this counter-argument is to strengthen the original position by another and wholly different course of reasoning. This may very effectively be done by applying the fundamental and accepted laws of population to the question in hand, and seeing how they would work out in such a case. If the conclusion thus reached coincides with that resulting from the other method of proof, we have a demonstration amounting almost to a certainty.

For this purpose we must go back to the set of doctrines first consistently expounded by Malthus and known by his name.

⁴Quoted by Hall, *Immigration*, 109.

Though they are now more than a century old, they still stand as one of the profoundest contributions to human knowledge. These doctrines are so familiar to all students of social subjects that the merest summary will serve our present purpose. This may be given in the following words. Under favorable circumstances, the reproductive power of the human species is very great. Actual cases of doubling of population in from twenty to twenty-five years have been known, and this may be taken as a maximum standard. But man is dependent for his existence on the food supply, and, owing to the actual conditions of production, there is no ground for the hope that the amount of subsistence of the world or of any nation can ever be increased at a rate corresponding to the possible increase of mankind. Consequently, the growth of the species is always limited by the possibilities of increase of the food supply, and, owing to the strength of the reproductive instinct, population will always be pressing hard on the limits of subsistence. The only means of providing for a greater population is by increasing the amount of productive land, or by improvements in the arts, making the land already under cultivation produce more food. Briefly stated, in any society, population tends to increase up to the supporting power of the soil. The forces which check the growth of population, however, are something more than starvation in the strictest sense of the word. They are enumerated by Malthus in a list of what he calls checks. These naturally fall under two heads: First, the positive checks which increase the death rate, viz., war, famine, pestilence, vice, etc.; these all produce misery and arise whenever population becomes too dense. Second, the preventive checks, which limit the birth rate, such as deferred marriage, celibacy, and voluntary restriction of births, vicious or otherwise; these are under the control of the human reason and will, and while they too entail a degree of suffering, it is not comparable to that caused by the other class of checks. All civilized societies have come more and more to employ the preventive checks, particularly that which is known as moral restraint.

The basic principles of Malthusianism remain as unassail-

able as when they were first propounded. But there have been certain modifications made necessary by the changing conditions of human society. As already suggested, the preventive checks hold a much larger place than formerly, and great weight is now attached to what are known as the institutional checks, such as the demands of education, late marriages, social obligations, the "emancipation" of woman, and a host of other customs and conventions which tend more or less imperceptibly to limit the number of births. Still more important, in the place of a bare subsistence as the limit upon which population is always pressing, has been substituted the standard of living, which includes all those necessities, comforts, and even luxuries which are customary in the social group in which the individual family finds itself placed. The limits of the family group are not now determined by the amount of bare necessities which are essential for the preservation of life—probably they never were absolutely—but rather by the amount of advantages which are required to keep the family in the social stratum to which it belongs or to which the parents aspire either for themselves or for their children. Particularly is this true in a democratic country like the United States, where social position depends not so much on rank or birth, as on wealth and education, both of which are attainable by effort and sacrifice. It is the desire for the "concentration of advantages" of this sort which leads to the restriction of the size of families.

With this set of laws in mind, let us seek to determine what effect might reasonably be expected to follow the introduction of a large number of immigrants from European countries into the American body politic. In the first place, it will be conceded that the great bulk of our immigrants represent a much lower standard of living than is customary among native American workmen in the occupations into which they go. Observation of conditions in the countries from which the immigrants come and in the colonies in which they settle after they arrive, establish this fact beyond the necessity of proof. Undoubtedly, many of the immigrants raise their standard of liv-

ing somewhat, after their arrival in this country, but not nearly up to the American level.

Since the immigrant has a lower standard than the native he can afford to work for lower wages, and since the amount of alien labor is so abundant and so easily available, the standard of wages in the occupations into which the immigrants go is set by the amount for which they are willing to work. This amount is lowered still further by the fact that the immigrant is generally quite willing to add to the income of his family by putting his children to work as soon as the law allows—or earlier, if possible—whereas the native ordinarily prefers to keep his children at home and in school as long as possible. Thus large families become a source of revenue for one, and an item of expense for the other. It is obviously impossible for the native to support the same sized family in the same degree of comfort on the new scale of wages as on the old. He is therefore confronted by a dilemma. He is compelled to choose between two alternatives. Either he may lower his standard of living and keep the same sized family, or limit the size of his family for the sake of the standard of living. But the lowering of the standard of living is something which every people—particularly the Americans—resist strenuously. If it is a question of the possibility of raising the standard, people often prefer larger families. This is instanced by the very significant fact that immigrants to this country do, as a rule, raise their birth rate very considerably. The foreign-born birth rate in Massachusetts in 1895 was 50.40, which is from 12 to 20 higher than in most European countries. But if it is a question of lowering the standard of living, the opposite course is taken. Once established, a standard of living has a tremendous tenacity. The American laborer chooses the other alternative. *He limits the size of his family.* Multiplied by tens of thousands, this expedient results in seriously checking the growth of population. This decrease in the number of native children destined to enter certain occupations makes a greater demand for alien labor, which is promptly supplied. Thus the invasion of the American standard goes on progressively, and gradually these occupations

come to be resigned more and more to foreign labor. Already, certain classes of work are commonly known as "Dago labor," others as "Hunkie labor," etc., and a self-respecting American parent shudders at the thought of having his child enter them.

This very fact is sometimes used as an excuse for the whole procedure. It is claimed that the natives are not displaced, but are simply forced into higher occupations. Those who were formerly common laborers are now in positions of authority. The fallacy of this argument is obvious. There are not nearly enough places of authority to receive those who are forced out from below. The introduction of 500 Slav laborers into a community may make a demand for a dozen or a score of Americans in higher positions, but hardly for 500. Furthermore, in so far as this process does actually take place, it must result in a lowering of the native birth rate, for it is a well-known fact that in all modern societies the higher the social class, the smaller is the average family.

What has been said thus far refers to the limitation of families after marriage. The same influences work to produce the same result in another way. The increased difficulty in earning enough to support a family, due to immigration, leads countless young men to postpone marriage for many years, and perhaps an equal number to give up marrying altogether. Both result in a great decrease in the birth rate for society as a whole.

The processes sketched above are mainly volitional. There are a variety of other influences, which work unconsciously, but perhaps none the less powerfully, to accomplish the same result. One writer has claimed that the shock produced on the American mind by the miserable class of immigrants in the thirties and forties, in itself had a profoundly detrimental effect on the natural rate of reproduction. Immigration has the effect of vastly increasing congestion of population, and congestion limits its growth. Furthermore, in an average group of immigrants, the males exceed the females by more than two to one. The introduction of such an unnatural element into the population must limit its reproductive power.

It is thus apparent that the laws of population would lead

us to expect exactly the result which the statistical data indicate—a decided fall in the native birth rate, due to the enormous and ever-increasing immigration into this country. The conclusion thus reached is corroborated and verified by a host of social workers, who testify from their own experience and observation. As an example, note the words of Walter A. Rauschenbusch, whose keen insight into social questions has placed him in the front rank of American thinkers: “The natives, who suffer by the competition of the immigrants and who feel the tightening grip of our industrial development, refuse to bring children into a world which threatens them with poverty.”⁵ Whether this decline in the native birth rate has been sufficient to offset the high birth rate of the foreign-born, and produce an actually smaller population than we would have had without any immigrants since 1820, is impossible of proof. It seems wholly probable that it has. The second generation of immigrants themselves feel the effect of the newcomers, and our foreign population shows a sharp decline in its birth rate after a generation of American life. At least, if immigration has not positively lessened our population, we may be certain that it has failed to increase it to any considerable extent.

Thus the great argument for immigration—the economic one—falls to the ground. The admission of millions of foreign laborers has not added to the working force of this country. It has not supplied a vast addition to the army of manual laborers, thus making possible the construction of railways, canals, sewers, and subways, which could not have been built without them, as is so often claimed. What has really been accomplished is this: We have supplanted native laborers with foreigners. In the place of the extraordinarily high standard of living of the American workingman’s family, we have substituted the standard of the European peasant, modified only to a slight degree. In the place of a united, homogeneous body of laborers we have introduced a medley of diverse racial groups, differing from each other in customs, language, and religion, jealous of each other, and scorned by the natives. Instead of a uniformly

⁵ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 273.

intelligent body of working people, endued by nature and inheritance with American ideals and ambitions, we have a laboring class but little higher in the scale of education than that of the most illiterate country of Europe. It need hardly be added that this process of degradation has by no means reached its full consummation as yet. But there is nothing in our present system of immigration regulation or public policy to prevent its proceeding to the bitter end.

The possible applications of this point of view to American public problems are too numerous and too varied to be even suggested in the present connection. Who knows how deeply the possibility of amassing swollen fortunes has been affected by the class of laborers with which our captains of industry have had to deal, and by the ease with which unlimited quantities of such labor can be procured? What a profound bearing this condition must have upon the problems of trade unionism, on the degradation of the ballot and bossism, on religious factionalism and indifference! Have we not already laid the foundations of a system of social stratification based on occupation, perhaps even on nationality? It is said that a large proportion of the "hobo" class in the United States is composed of native laborers who have been forced out of their occupations by foreigners with whom they are not able to compete.

A host of other queries and reflections will suggest themselves as the mind becomes habituated to the idea that our immigrants are not additions to our total population, but supplanters of native children, to whom they deny the privilege of being born. The whole question of the desirability of free immigration takes on a new aspect.

But the broad-minded and cosmopolitan thinker will at once be led to ask whether there is not another side to the question. Granting that the conditions outlined above really exist, granting that free immigration is not only a menace, but a source of actual injury to the United States, does not this nation, as a member of the world-wide brotherhood of mankind, owe a debt to less-favored peoples? Have we any right selfishly to

shut ourselves up to the enjoyment of our own advantages, to the exclusion of those who have been denied the privilege of being born on this side of the Atlantic? Are we justified in drawing the line of social responsibility and service sharply between Americans and non-Americans? Should we not rather open wide the doors of opportunity and keep the United States, as she always has been, the haven and refuge for the oppressed and down-trodden of all lands? Are we not debtors alike to the Greeks and the barbarians, to the wise and to the unwise?

These are pertinent questions and must make a strong appeal to every broad-minded American citizen. The answer to them depends primarily upon the truth or falsity of the second great assumption which we have noted, viz., that emigration decreases the population of the countries of source, and so improves social conditions therein. We are now ready to consider this question in the same manner as the former one.

In the first place, are there any trustworthy authorities who hold the view that emigration not only does not diminish population, but may actually tend to increase it? Investigation reveals an abundance of such authority. As early as 1790 this view was expressed by an anonymous writer in that quaint old magazine, the *American Museum*. He says: "When a country is so much crowded with people that the price of the means of subsistence is beyond the ratio of their industry, marriages are restrained; but when emigration to a certain degree takes place, the balance between the means of subsistence and industry is restored, and population thereby revived. Of the truth of this principle there are many proofs in the old counties of all the American states. Population has constantly been advanced in them by the migration of their inhabitants to new or distant settlements." John Stuart Mill believed that a steady emigration was powerless to cure the ills of over-population. Roscher, the great German authority on immigration, maintains that not only will emigration not decrease population, but may actually make the increase of population greater than it would otherwise be. René Gonnard, the French writer, says that the fact of emigration gives a stimulus to the birth rate, and cites Adam

Smith, Malthus, Garnier, Roscher, and De Molinari in support of the view.⁶ Robert Hunter also expresses his adherence to this opinion.

Observation of conditions in European countries substantiates these views. The population of Italy, in spite of the enormous emigration, is rapidly increasing. At no time has the population of Germany increased so fast as during the period of its greatest emigration.

With the laws of population in mind we can easily understand how this condition may result—in fact, how it *must* result. Every society, in the course of its development, reaches a balance between the means of subsistence and the desire for reproduction. This balance is represented by the standard of living. In a society where the desire for reproduction greatly overbalances the desire for comforts and luxuries, the standard of living will be low, and the rate of increase of population high. In a society where the public appetite for material welfare is strong, the opposite conditions will prevail. Changing conditions present the possibility of change either in the rate of reproduction or in the standard of living. As we have already observed, the former is the more flexible of the two factors. Particularly in static societies, such as exist in European countries where social positions have become thoroughly stratified, any amelioration in circumstances is much more likely to result in an increased rate of population growth, than in an improved standard of living.

Emigration, by *temporarily* relieving congestion to a certain extent, offers a chance of betterment. But this chance is seized by the reproductive power rather than by the standard of living. The rate of increase of population rises until the drain of emigration is offset, while the standard of living remains unaltered, and the total population continues the same. The very fact of emigration gives a sense of hopefulness to the people, and the knowledge that there is an ever-ready outlet for redundant inhabitants causes the population of the country to multiply more rapidly than it otherwise would. This is

⁶ René Gonnard, *Emigration européenne au XIX^e siècle*, 135.

emphatically and undeniably true of all regular and gradual emigration movements. The steady withdrawal of a more or less uniform number of inhabitants, year by year, has no power to reduce population, and sometimes, as in the case of Germany, actually increases it.

The only case where the opposite result may be achieved is where there is such a sudden and extensive removal of people from a country that those who remain feel a definite and profound lightening of pressure. This must be sufficiently immediate and widespread to produce a sudden and significant rise in wages or fall in prices. Then it may occur that before the forces of population have had time to fill the breach the people may have become accustomed to a somewhat higher standard of living, which thereafter they may be able and inclined to maintain. Examples of this in the history of immigration are rare. Possibly Ireland may furnish a solitary instance of a large section of country, the population of which has been materially reduced by emigration.⁷ In the words of John Stuart Mill, "When the object is to raise the permanent condition of a people, small means do not merely produce small effects, they produce no effects at all."⁸

Thus it becomes evident that the two fundamental assumptions with which we started are unsupported by either observation or theory. There may be many other arguments for or against immigration. But this is certain, as far as an increase in population on this side or a decrease on the other is concerned, neither this country, nor Europe, nor humanity at large, is benefited by immigration movements. The places of those who leave are filled by a host of newcomers, destined to just as unhappy a lot as that from which they have escaped, while their admission to this country denies existence to a multitude of those who otherwise would be born to a destiny probably

⁷ It is a question whether it is not a mistake, even in the case of Ireland, to attribute the decline in population wholly or mainly to emigration. During the decade of the forties, when the great Irish exodus took place, it was the famine, not emigration, which reduced population. Emigration furnished a means of escape to those who were otherwise doomed to die.

⁸ J. S. Mill, *Political Economy*, II, xiii, 265.

much more fortunate than that which the immigrants will ever achieve.

In this discussion, no reference has been made to the possible benefit to the individual immigrants themselves. Whether the change of residence results in a betterment of conditions for the majority of them or not, is a question very difficult of answer, and demanding a vast amount of study and investigation. But whatever these benefits are, they must be counted as a positive loss to the total welfare of humanity at large, unless it can be shown that the position attained by the immigrants is superior to that of the natives whom they supplant. This certainly has never been the case in the United States, and there is not the slightest prospect that it ever will be.